

Metric Illusion

Creating Rhythmic Tension With Triplets

by Marc Dicciani

MUSIC KEY

R.C.	
S.D.	
B.D.	
F.H.	
w/ foot	

Metric illusion is the effect you achieve when playing certain rhythms (using phrasing, accents, etc.) that sound as if they're in a different time signature, tempo, feel, or style. The purpose of using these types of patterns is not to drive your band crazy, or to ruin the groove. Rather, metric illusions are best used as a way to create temporary rhythmic tension in the music.

Tension and release are key components of all styles of contemporary American music, especially jazz. Often this rhythmic tension is created between players, like the drums and bass. But there are also ways to create tension within your own drumset patterns. That's what we'll explore in the following examples.

Pivot Rhythm

A pivot rhythm is the note value that you're using as the basis for a metric illusion. In this article, we'll use the quarter-note triplet as the pivot rhythm. The key to this metric illusion is to phrase the quarter-note triplets so that they sound like quarter notes in a faster tempo, or 8th notes in a slower tempo. To do that, you'll need to phrase the triplets in even groupings, like twos or fours.

Building The Illusion

Here's a series of exercises that will help you develop a metric illusion using quarter-note triplets. As the exercises progress, the triplets begin to sound more like quarter notes played in a straight 8th-note groove. Be sure to practice all of these exercises at a slow tempo at first.

Examples 1A, 1B, and 1C will help you develop control over the quarter-note triplets in the snare, bass, and hi-hat.

1A

1B

1C

Examples 2A and 2B focus on cross-limb independence. You should also try other variations of this hand-foot combination.

2A

2B

In Examples 3A and 3B, the phrasing starts to sound like it's in 2/4. This is because the hi-hat is now reinforcing the two-feel of the bass/snare pattern. As you practice these exercises, increase the volume of the illusion (snare, bass, and hi-hat), and decrease the volume of the ride pattern slightly.

3A

3B

Now things are starting to get interesting. In Examples 4, the quarter-note triplets are phrased in groups of four, which takes two measures to cycle.

4

The End Result

Here's a complete metric illusion, with three hi-hat variations. These examples group quarter-note triplets in a way that—when listened to without the ride pattern—sound like a straight 8th-

note pop/rock groove. Play the triplet figures a little louder than the ride pattern to really sell the illusion.

5A

5B

5C

There are many variations to this metric illusion. In all of the previous examples, we started the quarter-note triplet on beat 1 of the first measure. Try beginning the illusion in other parts of the measure, and experiment with different combinations of rhythms. Here's one more for you to explore.

6

You can use this same multi-step process to create your own rhythmic illusions. Remember, you can use any subdivision of the original tempo as a pivot rhythm to create phrases that sound like they're shifting tempos and feels. Good luck, and have fun!



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